

Bede's History in a Harsher Climate

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IN A MEMORABLE APPRECIATION of Bede, the late Sir Richard Southern spoke of being awed by Jarrow, the site of the monastery in which Bede lived and worked.¹ The Jarrow that I visited inspired more regret than elation. There was a church lying amidst the decay of industrialism, with pylons and high-tension wires providing the only uplift. Since then, there have been changes for the better, but South Tyneside seems immune to improvement. Hopeful organizers have now created a small theme park called "Bede's World."

Jarrow is a few miles downstream from Newcastle (a twelfth-century town) and not far from Hadrian's Roman wall. With Wearmouth, its twin, about fifty miles to the south, Bede's home was among the earliest monasteries in Northumbria. It had been

¹ R. W. Southern, "Bede," in *Medieval Humanism and Other Studies* (1970; reprinted, Oxford, 1984), p. 1. His comment that "whatever beauty there may be is distinctly austere," suggests that, at a simple level, his eyes and mine made out the same spectacle. Southern grew up near Jarrow. My remarks in what follows are based mainly on my chapter "Bede and the Ghost of Bishop Wilfrid," in *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550-800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton, N.J., 1988; reprinted, Notre Dame, 2005), pp. 235-328. It is supplemented by my "The *Historia ecclesiastica*: Bede's Agenda and Ours," *Haskins Society Journal: Studies in Medieval History* 2 (1990): 29-45, and "L'Histoire ecclésiastique et l'engagement politique de Bède," in *Bède le Vénérable entre tradition et postérité. Actes du colloque international Bède le Vénérable: bilan et perspectives*, ed. Stéphane Lebecq, Michel Perrin, and Olivier Szerwiniack (Lille, 2005), pp. 149-58 (which overlaps with the present study).

founded by a rich, restless nobleman named Benedict Biscop. The English Benedict tirelessly traveled to the Continent and Mediterranean, acquiring sumptuous furnishings for his foundations and a library of some 200 books.² He made Wearmouth and Jarrow treasure-houses for these artifacts from an advanced civilization. At no time before (even in the days of Roman Britain) had so much written culture been accumulated so far to the north. Bede was the most learned and productive scholar of the eighth century. He probably has no rival even in glamorous, remote Byzantium. The missionary and pedagogic activity of Anglo-Saxons in the Carolingian empire gave his name and exegetical writings wide currency beyond the homeland he himself never left. While living, Bede was neither hidden away nor obscure. By middle age he was the Northumbrian equivalent of a celebrity. Dignitaries from Canterbury far to the south dealt with him on serious matters, notably the contents of the history he was composing; and when he wrote admonitions to the bishop of York, he could expect a hearing.³

Monks were not normally ordained; Bede, however, was made a priest in 703. This marked his start as an ecclesiastical writer, a preacher on parchment. He died thirty-two years later. Biblical commentaries were the staple of his production, but he also wrote historical works. In 725 he composed a chronicle, or compact history of the world. Precisely when he started the *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* is not certain. Nevertheless he was old when this long, ambitious work was launched. He had not written anything of the kind before.⁴

The *Historia ecclesiastica* has five books. Starting with a description of the British Isles and their population, and with a glance at the Roman period, the history traces the gradual Christianization of England and ends with a brief account of conditions at

² Peter Hunter Blair, *The World of Bede* (1970; reprinted, Cambridge, 1990), pp. 155–83.

³ Goffart, *Narrators*, pp. 241 n. 33, 274–5, 296–8.

⁴ Goffart., pp. 241–42, 246–49.

the time of writing. These final lines are concerned only with Northumbria, and the same holds for more than half the entire history. Bede does not disregard England, but his work is not about all the lands conquered by the Anglo-Saxons. His slant is overwhelmingly Northumbrian. The chronological scope is also uneven. We hear much in books one and two about the Gregorian mission that started in 596, and most of the seventh century is well taken care of. But that is all. Just when Bede could have relied on his personal observations, his narrative virtually stops. The twenty-five years down to the time of writing are largely disregarded.

Bede's history is remarkably sunny. One admirable and endearing hero or heroine after the other parades before us. O happy island to have origins like these! None of the so-called "barbarian histories"—Jordanes, Paul the Deacon, Widukind, and others—comes anywhere close to being so positive and glowing. The extraordinary charm of Bede's England is unlikely to be a simple and direct reflection of what early England really was. Others before me have been well aware of this sobering thought. At a conference on early medieval historiography in 1993, Henry Mayr-Harting deplored a recent development in Bede studies: a generation of Bede lovers—Peter Hunter Blair, J. N. L. Myres, Dorothy Whitelock, J. M. Wallace-Hadrill—had departed from the scene. Their passing left Bede exposed in a harsher climate of Collinses, Kirbys, and Goffarts. I don't know how Roger Collins and David Kirby earned their anathemas; my sins are obvious. Even James Campbell, once a reliable Bede lover, had dared to bring the word "humbug" into Bede's vicinity.⁵ Today's surly iconoclasm seems to be defacing even St. Bede.

⁵ Henry Mayr-Harting, "Bede's Patristic Thinking as an Historian," in *Historiographie im frühen Mittelalter*, ed. Anton Scharer and Georg Scheibelreiter, Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung 32 (Vienna, 1994), p. 367. In my case he was referring to the Bede chapter of *Narrators*. For Campbell and "humbug," also see Mayr-Harting, p. 367.

When the Center for Medieval Studies at the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities invited me to speak at its conference on “Bede as Writer and Thinker” in 1998, I was asked whether there might have been a deep shift in my thinking about Bede in the ten years since I published *The Narrators of Barbarian History*. Did I still believe that Bishop Wilfrid, a prominent Northumbrian who died in 709, was “a concern central to Bede’s project?” I had to answer with apologies that my research had moved to other subjects, but that I had tried to keep track of how my Bede chapter has fared.

A disappointing aspect of its reception has been what looks to me like a *reductio ad Wilfridum*. Roger Collins, for example, declares: “[Goffart’s] thesis, that Bede was reacting to the posthumous influence of Wilfrid, may seem a little narrow.”⁶ What is narrow here is Collins’s arbitrary encapsulation of my argument. My Bede chapter covers much ground. The longest subsection, called “the genesis of Northumbrian church history,” tries to subvert the cherished idea that Bede’s history is isolated and unique.

At least one reviewer generously pointed out that, in this section, I “bring the *Historia ecclesiastica* into a dynamic relationship with the rest of the literature of the Northumbrian Golden Age,” and Averil Cameron flatteringly associates these same pages with Clifford Geertz’s anthropology by referring to a “thick Northumbrian context.”⁷ I mention Wilfrid in the chapter title and pay much attention to Bede’s attitude to him. But, *pace* Roger Collins and those who, like him, confuse the contents with the title, my account of the *Historia ecclesiastica* is more concerned

⁶ Judith McClure and Roger Collins, “Introduction,” in *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People. The Greater Chronicle. Bede’s Letter to Egbert*, ed. McClure and Collins, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford, 1994), p. xx, n. 19.

⁷ David Pelteret, “Year’s Work in Old English Studies,” *Old English Newsletter* 23 (1989), p. 81; Averil Cameron, review of Goffart, *Narrators of Barbarian History*, in *American Historical Review* 95 (1990): 1172.

with the Northumbrian kingdom and church of Bede's adulthood than with Wilfrid alone.

My *Narrators of Barbarian History* approaches the four historians of its title with an explicit program, the proper name for which, as Nancy Partner has helpfully told me, is "intentionalist." "If a single theme runs through this book," I say early in the Preface, "it is that, like us, Jordanes, Gregory, and the others meant to write what they did and were well aware of what they said and why."⁸ There is more explanation in chapter 1:

The four authors...undertook, for a variety of reasons, to record and interpret the past. Though more often honest and high-minded than not, their endeavors were never innocent, nor should anyone wish them to be. Their portrayals were conscious and deliberate, and worthy of sustained attention for precisely this reason.⁹

My intentionalism was not meant to be revolutionary or combative. But clouds gather thickly over the head of anyone who dares suggest that Bede might have been anything but innocent, spotless, and without sin. Some commentators portray Bede as a remote scholar, detached from the world, wholly caught up in books. My Bede is *engagé* and interventionist, too much so to remain unstained by what he was doing. Henry Mayr-Harting unrepentingly sides with innocence: "Bede's real world, I persist in thinking, was the world of books." Mayr-Harting said so in 1972 and does again in 1993. A Bede of this kind avoids entanglement in the dirty world.¹⁰

⁸ Goffart, *Narrators*, p. ix

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17.

¹⁰ Mayr-Harting, "Bede's Patristic Thinking," p. 373 (he adds: "my own perception of Bede as a scholar, historian, and human being is of a totally different character"; I respect that dissent). For his earlier formulation of this idea, see *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1972), p. 40.

The source passages I am about to quote give an example of the intentionalist approach to Bede. Doing so may illustrate what Mayr-Harting calls a “harsher climate.” The two quotations can be entitled, “Young Wilfrid decides to visit the Holy See.” I begin with the account of Wilfrid’s biographer, Stephen of Ripon, and continue with Bede’s adaptation of Stephen’s story:

“After the lapse of a few years, it came into the heart of this same young man, by the promptings of the Holy Spirit, to pay a visit to the see of the Apostle Peter, the chief of the Apostles, and to attempt a road hitherto untrodden by any of our race. By so doing he believed that he would cleanse himself from every blot and stain and receive the joy of the divine blessing.¹¹

My vows have been rendered to the Lord and I will fulfill them...to visit the Apostolic See, and to learn the rules of ecclesiastical discipline, so that our nation may grow in the service of God.”¹²

¹¹ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi* 3 (p. 8): “Deinde post circulum annorum, suggerente spiritu sancto, appellare et videre sedem apostoli Petri et apostolorum principis, adhuc inatritam viam genti nostrae temptare in cor adolescentis supradicti ascendit et ab ea omnem nodum maculae solvendum sibi credens et beatitudinem benedictionis accipiendam.” Trans. Colgrave, *Life of Wilfrid*, p. 9.

¹² Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi* 4 (p. 10): “Sunt vota mea Domino, quae reddam,...ut visitem sedem apostolicam et ecclesiasticae disciplinae regulas didicerim in augmentum gentis nostrae ad serviendum Deo.” Trans. Colgrave, *Life of Wilfrid*, p. 11. Wilfrid’s biographer is now called Stephanus or (as here) Stephen of Ripon. The traditional identification that Colgrave subscribed to is withering away (and not, I am happy to say, only by my doing). For the evidence, see Kirby, “Bede, Eddius Stephanus and the ‘Life of Wilfrid’,” pp.102–3; Goffart, *Narrators*, pp. 281–3. William Trent Foley, *Images of Sanctity in Eddius Stephanus* Life of Bishop Wilfrid, *An Early English Saint’s Life* (Lewiston, N.Y., 1992), despite its title, contains nothing that bears on the issues I discuss.

Stephen tells us about the youthful Wilfrid, while he was at Lindisfarne learning to be a monk at what may then have been the sole monastery in Northumbria. Wilfrid decides to visit Rome; he aims to enter the record books as the first Englishman to make this arduous journey. What he will get for his pains—that is, by reaching the tomb of St. Peter—is the fullest possible forgiveness for his sins. Stephen's account has innocent charm. Its attention to St. Peter's forgiving sins (and to the adolescent Wilfrid's believing that he needed forgiveness) is entirely believable. In the next passage, the bishop of Lyons offers Wilfrid inducements to stay in Frankish Gaul. Wilfrid demurs, giving a new reason for going to Rome: it is the source for the rules of ecclesiastical discipline; by learning them, he will profit his fellow-countrymen in the worship of God. It seems as though Wilfrid, once on the Continent, had become aware of the diversity of church usages and had decided to learn the right ones, as he would in Rome. Stephen introduces a major theme of his hero's life. A thorough grounding in Roman ecclesiastical practices would be very important to Wilfrid's career.

Bede had Stephen's story before him but did not summarize it literally:

After [Wilfrid] had served God in that monastery for some years, being a youth of shrewd understanding, he gradually came to realize that the way of virtue taught by the Irish was by no means perfect; so he resolved to go to Rome to see what ecclesiastical and monastic practices were observed in the apostolic see.¹³

¹³ Bede, *HE* 5.19 (pp. 518–19): “In quo videlicet monasterio cum aliquot annos Deo serviret, animadvertit paulatim adulescens animi sagacis minime perfectam esse virtutis viam, quae tradebatur a Scottis, proposuitque animo venire Romam, et qui ad sedem apostolicam ritus ecclesiastici sive monasteriales servarentur videre.” I do not follow Colgrave's translation of *virtutis viam, quae tradebatur a Scottis* as “the traditional way of virtuous life followed by the Irish.” The contrast of this passage with the *Vita Wilfridi* is not observed by Charles Plummer

Benign interpreters might say that Bede's abbreviation simply made explicit what Stephen implied. If we assume that Bede knew what he was doing, it looks as though he went well beyond abridgement. He conjures up Wilfrid as a quick-witted youth, who, while still underage, sniffs out defects explicitly labeled Irish. Stephen calls nothing Irish; he does not know about "defects." Bede's lines, though inspired by Stephen's *Life*, are his invention. He moves to Wilfrid's youth the hostility to Irish usages that crucially advanced his later career. This exercise in transposing Wilfrid's later attitudes to a much earlier date deserves notice as being an authorial initiative. As I said in *The Narrators of Barbarian History*, Bede deliberately did what he did, even if distortion was needed to do so.

This intentionalist approach to Bede has been pioneered by others. The basic issue is whether or not the *Historia ecclesiastica* is mimetic. Does it supply an exact image of what once was, or is it an artistic design, having the man-made truth of literary creation? Was early England exceptionally beautiful and enchanting, as it looks in the *Historia ecclesiastica*, or did Bede simply give it that guise? Are we dealing with nature or cosmetics? Elegant précis of the *Historia ecclesiastica* are often written, combining admiration, praise, piety, and love. Patriotic Englishmen deal reverently with a national treasure. But some have also cast critical looks at the *Historia ecclesiastica* and recognized that, however lovable and attractive the world of the *Historia ecclesiastica* may be, the image is not realistic. The very judicious James Campbell is an example of such discernment.¹⁴ What we look into is a distorting mirror, not a simple reflection. The removal of

in his fundamental commentary, *Venerabilis Baedae opera historica*, 2 vols. (1896; reprinted, 2 vols. in 1, Oxford, 1946), vol. 2, p. 321, or in *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People: A Historical Commentary*, ed. J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, Thomas Charles-Edwards, Patrick Wormald and others (Oxford, 1988), p. 192.

¹⁴ James Campbell, "Bede I," in *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History* (London, 1986), p. 25.

makeup from so endearing and cherished a text as the *Historia ecclesiastica* attracts vehement responses.

The editors of the new and welcome World's Classics edition of Bede's history outline the second major aspect of what I do in *The Narrators of Barbarian History*: "Only relatively recently has it come to be appreciated that some explanation is needed for Bede's undertaking of the [*Historia ecclesiastica*]; one, moreover, that takes account of his particular methods of working and of the special concerns which he displays for various themes, topics, and personalities. Goffart...has led the way here."¹⁵ The goal I announce in *Narrators* is to explore "the immediate and local circumstances that gave rise to the *History*." I continue, "In the life of early Northumbria, the composition and issuance of a work so largely concerned as Bede's is with local developments was itself a historical event."¹⁶ David Kirby's Jarrow Lecture for 1992, on "the Contemporary Setting" of Bede's history is, to quote Paul Remley, "one of the first continuous responses to arguments set out in [Goffart's] treatment of Bede." Kirby in fact anticipated me in drawing attention to Bede's immediate context. He wrote as early as 1983, "The key to unlocking the process of writing the *Historia ecclesiastica* may still lie concealed in the tensions of the time in which Bede wrote."¹⁷

Most of the *Historia ecclesiastica* was not drafted contemporaneously with the persons and events written about. The time of composition, ca. 730, has to be kept clearly distinct from the earlier period that was Bede's main subject—mainly the seventh century, down to 705. To us, the problems of the 1920s are mere

¹⁵ McClure and Collins, "Introduction," *Ecclesiastical History*, p. xx, n. 19.

¹⁶ Goffart, *Narrators*, p. 236.

¹⁷ D. P. Kirby, *Bede's Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum: Its Contemporary Setting* (Jarrow Lecture 1992). (I am very grateful to David Pelteret for giving me a xerox of this work); Paul Remley, "Year's Work in Old English Studies," *Old English Newsletter* 25.2 (1992): 63. For Kirby's earlier comment, see D. P. Kirby, "Bede, Eddius Stephanus and the 'Life of Wilfrid,'" *English Historical Review* 98 (1983): 114.

history by comparison with those of today. Much the same relationship between the dim past and the burning present is likely to have prevailed in Bede's day. The issues relevant in, say, the 660s were necessarily remote from those of Bede's time of writing. Alan Thacker, in a commendable recent article on "Bede and the Irish," asks us to believe that Bede was "much exercised" about the dating of Easter.¹⁸ Yet the Easter dispute, long resolved, was mere history by the time Bede wrote the *Historia ecclesiastica*. Words in books should not be confused with current emotions. Bede on Easter dating needs explanation, but it will not do to say that he "felt passionately" about a subject that had stopped being emotion-laden decades before.¹⁹ Problems have their day. There were new issues for Bede to feel passionately about when the *Historia ecclesiastica* was being written.

One new issue stands out in the early 730s. The composition of Bede's history was somehow related to the archbishopric of Canterbury and to the elevation of Northumbria to the status of an independent ecclesiastical province. Kirby and I agree on this point, at least in principle. The reorganization was completed in the year of Bede's death, when Nothelm, a priest of London well known to him, became archbishop of Canterbury. Bede pays much attention to Canterbury; the *Historia ecclesiastica* emphasizes its contribution to the making of the English church. The harmony of the Northumbrian church with the senior bishopric in England is made entirely clear. This emphasis was a matter of choice.²⁰

¹⁸ Alan Thacker, "Bede and the Irish," in *Beda Venerabilis: Historian, Monk and Northumbrian*, ed. L. A. J. R. Houwen and A. A. MacDonald, *Medievalia Groningana* 19 (Groningen, 1996), pp. 38, 59.

¹⁹ For agreement with Thacker that Bede's long chapter on Whitby shows how much he cared about Easter dating, see Peter Hunter Blair in n. 36, below.

²⁰ Goffart, *Narrators*, pp. 273–5, 287–8, 297; Kirby, *Contemporary Setting*, pp. 4–5.

Although the dealings between Canterbury and Northumbria from the 720s to 735 are less documented than we would like, the promotion of York to an ecclesiastical metropolis does shed light on the *Historia ecclesiastica*. The purpose of Bede's history was not to abase Wilfrid, or to stupefy us with the dating of Easter, or to praise Aidan, Cædmon, and Cuthbert, or to treat other particles of his subject. It was written to present the sum of these and other particulars, the aggregate that we read—an idealized, engaging, edifying account of the church of Northumbria and some of its neighbors, a glowing balance sheet of the Northumbrian past on the occasion of a great leap forward. The elevation of Northumbria to a higher ecclesiastical status was an extraordinary event. Bede could anticipate it even if his own life ran out before the change was completed. This was the future. For its guidance his history offered a vision of the past that was also a model of Christian virtue and holiness. Ultimately, the *Historia ecclesiastica* was written to sound exactly as it sounds—serene and beautiful. Bede gave it this tranquil and pleasing appearance for sturdy, level-headed, practical reasons, and he resorted to devious tactics, unavoidably, in order to attain his goal.²¹

²¹ Here and there, I have been referred to as hostile to Bishop Wilfrid. This is a misapprehension. If I were writing about Wilfrid, I would portray him positively, as befits an important, interesting, admirable figure. (I also have a high opinion of Stephen of Ripon's *Vita Wilfridi*, whose testimony can be preferable to Bede's.) If I seem negative toward Wilfrid, it is because I try to convey how he was regarded by persons who disapproved of him either in life or, after his death, in the shape of his successors. Their hostility toward Wilfrid and Wilfridians should not be attributed to me. For a recent account of Wilfrid highly resistant to my interpretations of Bede, see Alan Thacker, "Wilfrid [St. Wilfrid] (c.634-709/10)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, vol. 58 (Oxford, 2004), pp. 944–50.

What I have just said about Canterbury and York and the purpose of Bede's history is said just as clearly in *The Narrators of Barbarian History*, but placid observations attract less attention than controversial ones, such as those about Wilfrid. Wilfrid matters in my discussion—and Bede's—because his figure obstructs the horizon. Those dealing with the Northumbrian church cannot fail to see him except when Bede diverts attention to a parade of captivating substitutes. Wilfrid is not my invention. Long before I read Bede, Wilfrid had a confusing but prominent part in a survey course on church history that I took in my first year in graduate school. Political giants were familiar figures in my childhood. Winston Churchill is not too remote a parallel to Wilfrid in longevity. Equally prominent was Franklin Roosevelt, whose name, as I recall from personal experience, made rich grownups froth at the mouth. Colossi are controversial. Like them, Wilfrid was a giant bestriding his age.

Wilfrid had been dead and buried for twenty years when Bede wrote the *Historia ecclesiastica*. Emotions cool after two decades, but it was hard, nevertheless, to fit Wilfrid into a glowing, serene balance sheet of the Northumbrian past. Wilfrid stirred up enmities and earned several exiles. A realistic, factual account of "the age of Wilfrid" was incompatible with the history Bede set himself, or was asked, to write. Besides, the immediate, memorable past—the years after 705 that Bede virtually excludes from the *Historia ecclesiastica*—saw Wilfrid's successors and disciples strongly entrenched in the Northumbrian church.

Kirby's Jarrow Lecture is especially relevant here. The longest passage of arms between him and me concerns the politics of the early 700s.²² The background to these troubles is that King Aldfrid died in 705, having exiled Wilfrid many years before. A coup d'état took place at Aldfrid's death, excluding his very young son, Osred, and making a collateral heir king. Wilfrid came running from his exile in Mercia, expecting that

²² Kirby, *Contemporary Setting*, pp. 18–19, n. 51. This note is a concentrated polemic against my views.

the king who benefited from the coup d'état would receive him with open arms. Surprisingly, the intruder's reception was icy; he confirmed Wilfrid's banishment. More fool he. Wilfrid's response was to conspire with Osred's relatives. They joined forces, overthrew the intruding king in his second month, and installed little Osred after all.²³

This set of events amounted to a full-scale reversal of alliances. Osred's family had formerly exiled Wilfrid and harassed his adherents. Now, thanks to this disputed succession, Wilfrid and his enemies made peace. Wilfrid returned to Northumbria and was able, till his death in 709, to look after his multifarious disciples and monasteries. Two of the four bishoprics in Northumbria, and heaven knows how many more churches, were in the hands of Wilfrid's followers right down to the time when Bede wrote the *Historia ecclesiastica*.²⁴

Kirby rightly understands my position to be that "Wilfrid made a great comeback in 705," and he contests it with resolute minimalism. According to him, Wilfrid, a septuagenarian in failing health, returned to a kingdom in which the royal family had been implacably hostile to him. The bishops grudgingly agreed to his return, and the only churches given back to him were Hexham and Ripon. These religious communities, fearful of further vexation, remained on guard and set aside treasures for buying royal favor. Kirby corrects my use of the term "boy kings" for Aldfrid's successors; except for Osred, the kings were young, but not boys. "[T]he most influential ecclesiastical

²³ Goffart, *Narrators*, pp. 272–4. I learned most of what I know about Northumbrian politics from Kirby's writings. It is too bad that we diverge in its interpretation.

²⁴ Kirby, *Contemporary Setting*, pp. 18–19, n. 51. D. P. Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings* (London, 1990), p. 146, claims that "once secure in power" Osred's regime excluded Wilfrid from its liberality, but Osred was never really secure; the whole family was slipping, repeatedly ousted and sometimes restored. Its lack of generosity is an argument from silence. Is there information about its being either open-handed or stingy to anyone?

party in Northumbria” in these decades, Kirby maintains, was not Wilfrid’s successors but the see of York, “judging from the way in which [Bishop John] arranged the succession to York of his fellow-monk from Whitby, Wilfrid [different from the main Wilfrid].”²⁵

Kirby’s objections are defensible, but inconclusive. His puffing up of the church of York omits what matters most, namely, that Bishop John arranged his succession in a thoroughly uncanonical way. Far from showing strength, John’s action betrays frailty and apprehension. He was afraid that if he did not act, however illegally, outsiders—notably Wilfridians—would step in at his death and elect their candidate. There is no obstacle here to my proposal that Wilfrid’s successors, such as Acca of Hexham, were in the ascendant after the great man’s death. As for boy kings, I should have been more cautious, of course; but the expression is metaphorically appropriate. Boy kings do not have to be boys in age. It is uncontested that the Northumbrian kings between 705 and 729 have nothing noteworthy to their credit. None even produced an heir.

Kirby minimizes Wilfrid’s comeback of 705, suggesting that Stephen’s account in the *Vita Wilfridi* is rosier than called for. Kirby’s own goal seems to be to make “the Contemporary Setting” of Bede’s history colorless and nondescript. This is highly improbable. Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica* was not a casual, motiveless, private endeavor; the Preface to King Ceolwulf alone excludes that possibility. Nothing Kirby says diverts me from thinking that the contemporary setting of the *Historia ecclesiastica* was dramatic and stirring. Aldfrid’s succession brought about an abrupt realignment of forces, one wholly in keeping with political probability. Wilfrid returned, perhaps old, but nevertheless

²⁵ Goffart, *Narrators*, pp. 258–96. Like Kirby, Alan Thacker casts the Wilfridians as underdogs: “Lindisfarne and the Origins of the Cult of St. Cuthbert,” in *St. Cuthbert, His Cult and His Community to AD 1200*, ed. Gerald Bonner, David Rollason, Clare Stancliffe (Woodbridge, 1989), pp. 118–20, mainly on the tenuous grounds of the passage in my next note.

indispensable to the royal family that had formerly exiled him. Circumstances made him the adoptive father, so to speak, of little Osred. The royal family was in precipitate decline. Hostility to Wilfrid was a luxury it had every reason to forgo. The kings needed all the support they could get. Wilfrid's possession of Hexham and Ripon, which Kirby deprecates, gave him 50 percent of the bishoprics in Northumbria. Though less than 100 percent, it was not a proportion to be despised. Stephen of Ripon's reference to money for giving gifts to kings and bishops—a passage that has scandalized many commentators—should stop being taken as a sign of persecution or weakness. Even in placid, well-ordered lands, tax-free institutions find it circumspect and just to make gifts in lieu of taxes to competent authorities. We are shown an act of prudence, not of anxiety or fear. The context supplied by Stephen's *Vita* is one of normal behavior by monasteries toward kings and bishops.²⁶ After Wilfrid's death, his disciples could not take tranquility for granted, but the royal family needed them as much as when Wilfrid was alive, and their material condition was as opulent as ever.

The prosperity of the Wilfridians in the years before the *Historia ecclesiastica* calls for one more comment. Bede's final work, dated 734, was an open letter to Ecgberht, bishop of York, denouncing the abuses of the recent Northumbrian church. Ever

²⁶ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi* 63 (p. 136), Wilfrid has his riches divided into four (unequal) piles, one to be distributed among a set of churches in Rome, two to be distributed among his own poor dependents (*pauperibus populi mei*), “alteram autem partem praepositi coenobiorum duorum saepe dictorum inter se dividant, ut cum muneribus regum et episcoporum amicitiam perpetrare potuerint” [the second part let the heads of the two oft-mentioned abbeys divide among themselves so that they may be able to purchase the friendship of kings and bishops]. Trans. Colgrave, *Life of Wilfrid*, p. 137. Stephen himself finds this procedure unremarkable; only modern commentators somehow forget that gifts often confirm friendship and do not have to be automatically interpreted as averting hostility.

since 705, Bede said, the church had been declining from a better past; his reference to “since 705” took in almost the whole of his adulthood. The *Historia ecclesiastica* praises Wilfrid’s enemies and drastically downplays Wilfrid’s achievements.²⁷ Because Wilfrid and company had been dominant since 705, Bede’s lines to Ecgberht implicitly denounce Bede’s bishop and patron, the very magnificent Acca of Hexham, who was expelled from his see late in 731. Ceolwulf, king since 729, and his cousin Ecgberht, the bishop of York, embodied a new order in Northumbria. Bede had great hopes for them. The old dynasty and its Wilfridian backers had led the church astray but were at last on the way out. The new Northumbrian leaders, with York as center of a province, offered excellent prospects of reform.²⁸ The *Historia ecclesiastica* would instruct and guide them.²⁹

A comment of mine that has seemed very shocking is that Bede censured Bishop Acca, at least by implication, and certainly kept friendly company with the men responsible for Acca’s downfall. Kirby intimates, on the contrary, that the expulsion of Acca must have made Bede anxious.

²⁷ Bede, *Epist. Ecgb.* (pp. 405–23). The best proof of Bede’s success in playing down Wilfrid’s achievements in Northumbria is that Alcuin, in his commemoration of the bishops of York, is aware of only Wilfrid’s doings outside Northumbria.

²⁸ For more on Bede’s concern with reform, see Alan Thacker, “Bede’s Ideal of Reform,” in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society: Studies Presented to J. M. Wallace-Hadrill*, ed. P. Wormald, D. Bullough, and R. Collins (Oxford, 1983), pp. 130–53; and Scott DeGregorio, “*Nostrorum socordiam temporum*: The Reforming Impulse of Bede’s Later Exegesis,” *Early Medieval Europe* 11 (2002): 107–22; idem, “Bede’s *In Ezram et Neemiam* and the Reform of the Northumbrian Church,” *Speculum* 79 (2004): 1–25.

²⁹ On Acca’s splendid career and closeness to Wilfrid, see Goffart, *Narrators*, p. 273 with n. 177. On Bede’s ties to Acca’s persecutors, see *ibid.*, pp. 273–4, 294–5.

Acca was very close to Wilfrid and succeeded him at Hexham in 709. Besides being the bishop in whose diocese Wearmouth and Jarrow were situated, he sponsored Bede's biblical commentaries. He was the equivalent to Bede of the granting agencies that foster our research with needed subsidies. Acca's eviction from Hexham in 731 came too late to fit into the *Historia ecclesiastica*. Nevertheless, Bede's letter to Ecgberht implicitly classes Acca as one of the unworthy churchmen of the recent past. No exception is made for him. Bede was on cordial terms with the dignitaries who chased him from Hexham. Kirby maintains, "[Bede] had certainly expressed great affection for Acca in the past."³⁰ Are we sure that he had?

The six surviving letters from Bede to Acca are all dedications of biblical commentaries. These are public, not personal documents, heading the commentaries in question and advertising Acca's sponsorship. Charles Plummer, a hero to any student of the *Historia ecclesiastica*, judged the relationship unambiguously: "Bede evidently cherished the warmest affection for [Acca]."

³⁰ Kirby, *Contemporary Setting*, p. 6. Kirby, continuing, brackets the expulsion of King Ceolwulf with that of Acca; the deposition of the king "must have been extremely disturbing [to Bede] and the expulsion of his diocesan at the very least an occasion for anxiety concerning the pastoral life of the church in Bernicia." See also Wallace-Hadrill, *Historical Commentary*, p. 207 (addenda); the editors claim that Acca's expulsion in the year of Ceolwulf's overthrow allows us to suppose "that he was a close supporter of the king." The sources tell us that King Ceolwulf was restored *before* Acca was expelled, that Acca stayed in exile till his death, and that he was replaced at Hexham while still alive (the replacement was necessarily with Ceolwulf's assent). The idea of closeness between Acca and Ceolwulf seems to be out of the question. Meanwhile, Bede praised Acca's persecutors, Ceolwulf and Ecgberht. He wrote a tract denouncing Northumbrian church life for the past twenty-five years and looking forward to improvement. These facts contradict Kirby's interpretation, and Thacker's (n. 32 below).

The letters embody expressions of emphatic esteem and friendship: “dearest,” “dearest of prelates,” “most lovable of bishops,” “most loved and wished-for of all bishops there are in the world,” etc. The same words, *amantissime*, *dilectissime*, variants of our formulaic “dearest,” return again and again.³¹

Plummer read the letters as expressions of Bede’s private feelings; so have others. My doubts about Bede’s attachment to Acca have seemed to accuse a saint of insincerity and hypocrisy. One can only speculate about Bede’s character, but the language of his letters has to be appraised in the context of the epistolary genre. His phrases are well suited to the circumstances—wholly conventional, possibly outright flattery, and in any case no measure of his feelings. Bede could not be false because no truth was asked of him, any more than it is from us when we use formulas like “Dear so-and-so,” or “Sincerely yours.” Good manners are in question, not feelings.³²

Up to now, I have discussed mostly circumstances outside the *Historia ecclesiastica*. As I return to the Wilfrid problem, I shall consider at least a part of Bede’s narrative.

Lovers of Bede such as Henry Mayr-Harting deplore the new harsh climate for (I believe) one particular reason: the conflicts and dissembling that certain commentators claim to detect in the *Historia ecclesiastica* contrast sharply and offensively with

³¹ Plummer on Acca’s letters: *Baedae opera historica*, pp. xxxiii, xlix (“for whom [Bede] evidently cherished a warm affection”). Bede’s many addresses to Acca, ringing changes on “dearest,” are listed.

³² Thacker, “Lindisfarne and St. Cuthbert,” p. 121, agrees with Plummer about the sincerity and depth of Bede’s attachment to Acca; Wallace-Hadrill, *Historical Commentary*, p. 195, Bede was long a close friend of Acca. These opinions need at least to be qualified. It is not axiomatic that Acca’s sponsorship of Bede’s exegetical works generated friendship between them. Beneficiaries of patronage have to cultivate their patrons but do not necessarily have cordial feelings toward them (or, as in this case, approve of their policies as bishops). See also Goffart, “Bede’s Agenda,” pp. 42–43.

the sweetness and light so obvious at its surface. I allege that Bede was hostile to Wilfrid, yet nothing in the *Historia ecclesiastica* clearly attacks or disparages him. Many lines of the *Historia ecclesiastica* mention Wilfrid. In keeping with the positive and laudatory sound of the *Historia ecclesiastica*, readers are led to believe that Wilfrid was as constructive a figure in the English church as Aidan or Archbishop Theodore or the deacon James. My references to Wilfrid's ghost in Bede's history look exaggerated when balanced against these considerations. Nevertheless, a two-faced Bede existed before I said anything about him. Eric John remarked that Bede looks as though he goes out of his way more than once not to contradict the *Vita Wilfridi* "whilst conveying a totally opposed view of the same facts."³³

Wilfrid's most memorable and popular achievement was to unburden Northumbria of its Irish clergy. "Cleansings" of this kind are not foreign to the experience of recent and earlier history. Idi Amin expels the East Asians from Uganda; Honduras evicts its Lebanese; the English drive the French *habitants* from Acadia after its conquest; Edward I bars the Jews from England. Foreign residents engage in a specialized gainful activity; by clearing them out on some pretext or other, it is expected that one's own people will be gratified by getting the jobs and the profits. The pattern repeats across the centuries (if sources allowed, it would no doubt be found in prehistory). Wilfrid succeeded in step one—getting the aliens out. Step two, taking their place and profits, eluded him. He incurred enough enmity not to be able to win a position of unassailable power in the Northumbrian church. Instead, he was exiled and had his ups and downs. His return in 705 has already been discussed. Let me backtrack to Wilfrid's initial triumph. Even as late as when Bede wrote the *Historia ecclesiastica*, Wilfrid would have remained famous and esteemed in Northumbria for ousting the Irish and making room for Northumbrians.

³³Eric John, "Social and Political Problems of the Early English Church," *Agricultural History Review* 18 (1970): 44.

Irish missionaries had worked in Northumbria since about 635. At royal invitation the monastery of Iona had sent Aidan and helpers. The original Canterbury-based mission to Northumbria had been destroyed and forgotten, with the result that the Ionan Irish thought of themselves as the initiators of Northumbrian Christianity. Local disciples flocked to them. In ten years, there must have been a growing, Irish-trained English element among the clergy and monks of the Northumbrian church. Young Wilfrid spent enough time at (Irish dominated) Lindisfarne to acquire a taste for church life and a longing for travel. He soared to fame by finding the lever that eased out the Irish and delivered the church to persons like himself, native Northumbrians trained initially by Irish clergy, but then also perfected in continental church practices or adhering to them.

Expulsions of alien élites, wrapped in legality, meet with much approval in the lands where they occur and are warmly remembered. Stephen's *Vita Wilfridi* attributes a speech of justification to Wilfrid: "Was I not the first...to root out the poisonous weeds planted by the Irish? Did I not change and convert the whole Northumbrian people to the true Easter and to the tonsure in the form of a crown, in accordance with the practice of the Apostolic See?"³⁴ The words that Wilfrid's biographer placed in his hero's mouth were not controversial. Even in 720 Northumbrians would have recalled with pride, not the true Easter or the crown tonsure, both now routine and humdrum, but the shaking off of Irish dominance. Wilfrid's ups and downs with Northumbrian kings, his ambitions for property and power, and other aspects of his long life were open to contestation; but the cornerstone of his career, the championship of Rome against

³⁴ Stephen, *Vita Wilfridi* 47 (p. 98): "Necnon et ego primus...Scotticae uirulenta plantationis germina eradicarem; ad uerumque pascha et ad tonsuram in modum coronae...secundum apostolicae sedis rationem totam Ultrahumbrensium gentem permutando conuerterem." Trans. Colgrave, *Life of Wilfrid*, p. 99. This is part of a longer speech of justification at the Synod of Austerfield (date uncertain, in the earliest 700s).

Irish “poisonous weeds,” was unassailable. Bede had to be aware of this.

What was he to do? He was not free to write whatever he wished. In the *Historia ecclesiastica*, the Northumbrian church had to look unfailingly rosy; and Wilfrid the extirpator of the Irish was beyond reproach. Eric John outlined how Bede escaped this dilemma: he consistently expressed simple, overt approval and just as consistently undermined it by covert maneuvers.

A salient example is Bede's account of the Synod of Whitby in 664. This was when the king of Northumbria subscribed to the Roman method of dating Easter and exiled whatever clergy clung to the Irish system. Whitby was where Wilfrid triumphed and forced the Irish out. Stephen, his biographer, conveys this message briefly and clearly; he had no need to beat about the bush. Bede, however, is anything but straightforward.

In the *Historia ecclesiastica*, the synod of Whitby is immediately followed by the onset of a terrible plague. Bede was not a slave to chronology; without taking undue liberties, he manipulates time sequences to suit his narrative. Here he behaves as though chronology forced his hand. Christian historians considered major events to be metaphysically significant; disasters were divine retribution for human misdeeds. A report of the plague in Northumbria did not *have* to be fitted in right after Whitby. Placed where it is, the plague comments tacitly on what had come before.³⁵

Hunter Blair says: “In Bede's eyes, if we may judge by the length of the chapter which he devoted to it, the great Easter controversy and the decisions reached at the Synod of Whitby seemed the most important topic of the age.”³⁶ It is hard

³⁵ Bede, *HE* 3.27 (p. 312). *HE* 3.26 (pp. 308–10) is an appendix to the synod of Whitby, telling in flattering terms how admirably the Irish responded to their setback.

³⁶ Peter Hunter Blair, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation and Its Importance Today* (Jarrow Lecture, 1959), p. 9. Yet the synod occurred

to see how a brief gathering of churchmen in the 660s could still be “the most important topic” of the 730s. Hunter Blair is not alone in considering chapter length a reliable measure of Bede’s interest and involvement. But why should this be so? Brevity allows blunt, forthright presentations, as in Stephen’s *Vita Wilfridi*. What Bede resorts to in the Whitby chapter is dilution by increase, the same thing he does when handling Gildas’s *De excidio* in Book 1.³⁷

A typical dilution occurs at the start of Bede’s Whitby chapter. Whereas Stephen of Ripon pits the Irish bishop Colman against Wilfrid one-on-one, Bede evokes a generalized dispute involving a crowd on both sides. Wilfrid is watered down by the addition of many persons who cared about Roman Easter dating before he did, and by the attribution to him of a tedious but impeccable speech more than twice as long as the obdurate Irish reply. By heavy-duty dilution Bede succeeds in suggesting that Wilfrid was just one of a group, that the date of Easter was a serious, or at least a scholarly issue, and that expelling the Irish was not the primary objective. As plague then sets in, we infer that what happened at Whitby did not earn the blessing of Almighty God. Bede’s drawn-out chapter was not concerned only with the dating of Easter.

The longer I dwell on the *Historia ecclesiastica*, the less I share Henry Mayr-Harting’s view that I am hard on Bede. The climate affecting the *Historia ecclesiastica* in recent times changed from mild to harsh as soon as critical readers realized that Bede’s English church could not have been so serene, lovable, and grand in reality as it was in his narrative. This realization did not occur just yesterday. I would not be surprised if Mayr-Harting

almost a decade before Bede’s birth. Chapter lengths are meaningful, but they do not clearly and invariably measure an author’s concern for a subject.

³⁷ About Bede and Gildas in Book 1 of the *HE*, see Goffart, *Narrators*, pp. 299–302.

himself, in his fine book of 1972, conceded every now and then that the whole truth about early Anglo-Saxon England does not float gently on the surface of the *Historia ecclesiastica*.³⁸

The main innovation of my *Narrators of Barbarian History* concerning Bede is the contention that he was deliberate in what he wrote. Possibly, he pieced together the truth about the past out of inadequate sources, carrying out a role comparable to a midwife's. More probably the *Historia ecclesiastica* is a studied construction, a work of art, embodying sources, to be sure, but also the beliefs and calculations of its maker. Intentionalism can be disputed; the casual "just like us" that I slip in, offering today as a yardstick for measuring Bede's day, might be contested. The opposing viewpoints need to be debated; they implicate more historians than Bede.

The context in which Bede wrote the *Historia ecclesiastica* was different from the one portrayed in its pages. It is only reasonable to assume that the needs and problems of the Northumbria which Bede masks in book five are the ones that weighed on his mind when he wrote the *Historia ecclesiastica*. The history that is familiar to us from Bede's narrative—a very pleasing seventh-century Northumbrian church, all sweetness and holiness—is the image that was called for and Bede supplied, but not the one he lived in. The 730s context ranks high among subjects about which I should like to be better informed.

Today's interpreters are surprisingly wide in their disagreements. In *The Narrators of Barbarian History*, for example, I argue that Bede's account of Cædwalla, the early king of Wessex, is ironic—ostensible praise masking the portrait of a bloodthirsty upstart. The ironic Bede is a rare bird; irony mixes poorly with

³⁸ Patrick Wormald, "Bede, *Beowulf* and the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy," in *Bede and Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. R. T. Farrell, British Archaeological Reports, British Series 46 (Oxford, 1978), pp. 68–69, argues that Bede had no grasp of the contemporary lay world; Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, pp. 254–6, is similar.

the surface appearance of the *Historia ecclesiastica*.³⁹ Meanwhile, Kirby decides that Canterbury would have been unhappy with Bede's friendly portrayal of the Irish, and Thacker takes Bede for an Easter date fanatic.⁴⁰ The habit of reading the *Historia ecclesiastica* as a text in the mimetic mode, exactly reflecting the three-dimensional world and candidly documenting Bede's sensitivities, is still with us. The climate may be harsher for poor Bede, but the sun shines brightly on would-be critics of Bede's history. There is much for them to do.

³⁹ Goffart, *Narrators*, pp. 318–19. See the comment in Bede, *HE*, ed. McClure and Collins, p. 411, note to p. 244. See also on Bede's puzzling exculpation, Walter Goffart, "Bede's *Uera lex historiae* Explained," *Anglo-Saxon England* 34 (2005): 111–16.

⁴⁰ Kirby, *Contemporary Setting*, p. 15 (also p. 11): "Bede was unhappy with Aidan's failure to celebrate Easter correctly." It is paradoxical to suggest that Bede, who deeply admired the very long dead Aidan, should have personally grieved at his celebrating Easter in the only way he ever learned. Thacker, "Bede and the Irish," p. 59, alleges that Bede was even more passionate about Easter dating than his contemporaries.